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Born into Covenantal Salvation? Baptism and Birth in Early Christianity and Classical Rabbinic Judaism

Abstract: This article seeks to propose a new conceptual framing for the question of baptism in early Christianity. It takes for its starting point a study that puts forth the claim that in the first three centuries, infants born into a Christian household were not baptized; if the parents were already part of the Christian community, then any child born to such parents was considered to be born Christian. Such a claim would imply that salvational status can be passed down genealogically by Christian parents to their children. I demonstrate that a detailed examination of the theological understanding of conversion and birth in classical Jewish, rabbinic literature can shed light on how we might historically understand the status of baptism and birth in early Christianity.

Key words: baptism, genealogy, ethnicity, conversion, rabbinic Judaism, Christianity.

Introduction

This article seeks to propose a new conceptual framing for the question of baptism in early Christianity. It takes for its starting point Walter Schmithals's study, "On the Problem of Baptizing Children in Early Christianity,"¹ which puts forth a seemingly radical claim regarding the question of children born to Christian parents and the need for baptism. Previous scholarly debate had been divided over those who held that Christians in the first three centuries baptized infants at birth (as in subsequent Roman Catholic and Lutheran traditions) and those who held that in that time period only consciously consenting adults or older children were baptized (as in subsequent Baptist and Anabaptist traditions of "believer's baptism"). In contrast to both, Schmithals examines a broad range of early Christian historical data – ranging from grave inscriptions to the writings of theologians such as Origen and Tertullian – in order to argue that the available evidence

1 Walter Schmithals, "On the Problem of Baptizing Children in Early Christianity," in his *The Theology of the First Christians* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997) 230–237; orig. *Theologiegeschichte des Urchristentums* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1994) 198–205.

points instead to the conclusion that infants born into a Christian household were not baptized at all, either in infancy or in later adult life. Instead, he holds that if the parents were already part of the Christian community, then any child born to such parents was considered to be “born Christian” and shared in the baptismal gifts of the parents without the need to undergo individual baptism themselves. Such a claim would imply that salvational status can be passed down “genealogically” by Christian parents to their children.

To many readers today, this notion cannot be easily reconciled with dominant notions of Christianity and Christian theology. The idea of “salvation by birth” may seem incompatible with the ostensibly core element of Christian tradition by which Christians are “made” (through individual baptism), not “born.”² Thus, despite the *prima facie* correspondence between his argument and the available historical data, Schmithals’s claim has not been widely taken up among scholars of early Christianity, and has not even been seriously engaged.³

Among the historical data put forward in making his argument, Schmithals mentions “Jewish proselyte baptism” only once and only in passing. Additionally, while providing a basically persuasive argument for the claim that the early church baptized converts but did not baptize children of Christian parents, he does not devote much attention to working out the theological conceptuality that might correspond to such posited practices. I argue that a more detailed examination of the theological understanding of conversion and birth in classical rabbinic literature can shed light on how we might historically understand the status of baptism and birth in early Christianity. While the texts of classical rabbinic Judaism are dated somewhat later – from the beginning of the third century (with the redaction of the

2 See below for discussion of Tertullian’s original formulation of “Christians are made, not born.”

3 Indeed, Schmithals’s claim seems to have been almost completely ignored, with no attempt made to argue against or refute his analysis of the historical evidence. The one scholar I have found who even acknowledges Schmithals’s claim is James Dunn; see his *Theology of Paul the Apostle*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 459, where Schmithals’s claim is mentioned only in passing in a footnote and simply dismissed out of hand. Likewise, in an article acknowledging the lack of positive evidence for either infant baptism or believer’s baptism in early Christianity, Antony N. S. Lane briefly addresses the possibility that children born to Christian parents were not baptized at all, but quickly dismisses this possibility without providing a substantial case against it or mentioning Schmithals’s extended argument; see A. Lane, “Did the Apostolic Church Baptize Babies?” *Tyndale Bulletin* 55 (2004) 127. For an overview of scholarship on the question of infant baptism and believer’s baptism in the early church, see Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009) 384–385.

Mishnah in c. 200 CE) to around the sixth century (with the redaction of the Babylonian Talmud in c. 550 CE) – the conceptual framework that they display is, I argue, quite compatible with the available historical evidence from the first centuries of early Christianity.

That is to say, if we take the proposals put forth by Schmithals and look at them with rabbinic conceptuality in mind, then the theological notion of being “Christian by birth” appears much less surprising or strange. Accordingly, examination of classical rabbinic conceptuality raises the possibility that Christianity, in its first few centuries, preserved a “Jewish” understanding of entry into God’s covenant relation through birth. If so, it was only subsequently that a different conception of baptism arose in Christianity, such that the soteriological status of natural birth came to be viewed as characteristic of “Jewish” traditions like rabbinic Judaism but not of Christian conceptuality and theology. This proposal meshes well with the recent arguments of scholars such as Denise Kimber Buell, Caroline Johnson Hodge and Matthew Thiessen, who have noted ways in which “ethnic” or “genealogical” modes of thought played a significant role in prominent streams of early Christian self-identity, as well as ways in which early Christian texts appear to preserve and draw upon themes from the Hebrew Bible in shaping their conceptions of community and peoplehood. Thus, if inheritance of covenanted status by natural birth is a prominent part of the presentation of the Hebrew Bible, as well as of later rabbinic Judaism, and if early Christianity displays similar conceptual dynamics, and if in addition there is no historical evidence of baptism of those born to Christian parents in the first few centuries of Christianity, then it seems quite plausible to posit that the early Christian communities similarly viewed baptism as appropriate only for conversionary entry, not for children “born into” the people of God.

1. Historical and methodological considerations

The methodology of my argument is as follows: I present a conceptual-theological account, drawn from classical rabbinic literature, of the roles of immersion and natural childbirth in determining covenant status before God. In this context, we find a basic orientation wherein immersion is crucial and necessary for those entering the covenant from outside, but is neither necessary nor appropriate for children born to parents who are themselves already “inside” the covenant community. After this, I return to Schmithals’s argument and detail the ways in which the rabbinic theological

conceptuality can reinforce and add greater weight to his basic claims about early Christian practices. My argument is not dependent on claims that the rabbinic understandings of childbirth and conversionary immersion historically predated or influenced early Christian conceptuality.⁴ Instead, the account drawn from rabbinic literature simply serves to illuminate the conceptual plausibility of my hypothesis concerning early Christian understandings, since both traditions draw upon earlier Hebrew Bible streams of thought: if we posit that the early Christian conception of communal-covenantal status might have been similar to the theological conceptuality displayed in the rabbinic texts, we find that this way of thinking can fit with, and help to make sense of, the available historical evidence regarding the role of baptism in the early Christian communities.

The argument presented here does not definitively exclude the possibility that some early Christian communities could have practiced infant baptism or believer's baptism. Nor does it claim to have definitively demonstrated the historical practice of non-baptism of children born to Christian parents.⁵ Instead of providing new historical data about early Christian baptismal practices, it seeks to call into question the typical assumptions with which scholars have approached the existing available historical evidence. Specifically, I argue that, particularly in conjunction with the juxtaposition of classical rabbinic conceptuality, as well as recent scholarship on genealogical thinking in early Christianity, the most plausible way of accounting for the available evidence concerning baptism is through the hypothesis that the early Christian communities viewed children born to Christian parents as already "born into Christ's covenant," and thus as not standing in need

4 Indeed, it is possible that the rabbinic conceptuality, particularly in later sources, was itself influenced by awareness of Christian conceptuality; see Yair Furstenberg, "Christianization of Proselyte Baptism in Rabbinic Tradition," in *Coping with Religious Change in the Late-Antique Eastern Mediterranean*, ed. Eduard Iricinschi and Chrysi Kotsifou (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017). The present argument, however, would not be affected by such a possibility one way or another. On such methodological questions of influence and of parallels between Christian and rabbinic thought, see Israel Yuval, "Christianity in Talmud and Midrash," in *Transforming Relations: Essays on Jews and Christians Throughout History* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010) 50–74.

5 The available historical evidence does not enable a definitive argument in this regard, due in large part to the striking absence, among the Apostolic Fathers, of explicit statements regarding baptism of children born to Christian parents. David F. Wright maintains that "[a] critical question remains as to how we should interpret their silence." See D. Wright, "The Apostolic Fathers and Infant Baptism," in *Trajectories through the New Testament and the Apostolic Fathers*, ed. Andrew Gregory and Christopher Tuckett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 133.

of any separate act of baptism or conversion. If one suspends assumptions that the early church must have practiced either infant baptism or believer's baptism for those born within the community, and instead approaches the available evidence afresh, one finds as much, if not more, weight in favor of the non-baptism hypothesis as in favor of the baptism hypothesis. As such, at the very least, the former ought to be brought into scholarly discussions more equally alongside the latter. This, in turn, calls for a significant reconfiguration of assumptions regarding the general theological conceptuality of the role of natural birth and genealogical belonging in early Christianity, as well as for further investigation as to when explicitly "non-genealogical" and "non-ethnic" conceptions of the Christian covenantal community arose and gained dominance, and thus parted ways with Jewish/rabbinic conceptuality in this regard.

2. Conversion, immersion and birth in classical rabbinic literature

I draw upon classical rabbinic literature to construct a basic account of the way immersion and birth can be understood in relation to membership in the covenant community. I do not claim that the various texts from the classical rabbinic corpus display an identical understanding with regards to all aspects of conversion and birth.⁶ However, I seek to draw upon elements that constitute a dominant and broadly common theme across classical rabbinic literature, wherein immersion plays an important role only for converts, and not for those born into the covenant community. My goal is to construct a basic heuristic account, in order to provide a theological-conceptual framework for illuminating the Christian material by way of comparison, without making an exhaustive claim about the whole of rabbinic literature.

In the rabbinic framework, conversion constitutes the ritual-performative-theological transformation of an individual from a Gentile outsider (*goy*) to a member of the covenant community of Israel (*yisra'el*).⁷

6 For elements of diversity, although within a framework of broad conceptual agreement, in different classical rabbinic treatments of conversion, see, e.g., Gary Porton, *Stranger within Your Gates* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) 133–134; Joshua Levinson, "Changing Minds – Changing Bodies," in *Religious Conversion: History, Experience and Meaning*, ed. Ira Katznelson and Miri Rubin (Surrey: Ashgate, 2014) 148.

7 On the term *gerut* used to designate conversion, see BT Gittin 85a. For scholarly treatments of the rabbinic conversion ceremony, see Shaye Cohen, *Beginnings of Jewishness*

Importantly for our comparative study, a key element of this transformation was ritual immersion in water – i. e., a form of “baptism.”⁸ While the earliest origins of conversionary immersion within the rabbinic or proto-rabbinic context remain historically unclear, it nevertheless appears to be the case that “by the end of the Tannaitic period (ca. 200 CE), immersion was recognized in rabbinic circles as an essential part of conversion.”⁹ Thus, “Just as Israel entered the covenant through three things – circumcision, immersion (*tevilah*) and an acceptable sacrifice – so the same is the case for converts.”¹⁰ The rabbinic framework thus presents immersion as a crucial element both for Israel’s initial entering into the covenant at Sinai and for latter-day entrants into the covenant by the ritual of conversion. While some later sources debate whether it is circumcision or immersion that is “most crucial,”¹¹ the general picture of conversion is that immersion is a crucial normative element (along with circumcision). The importance of immersion in the process of conversion comes across most clearly in the case of women, who are explicitly said to enter into Israel’s covenant through immersion, without circumcision.¹²

(Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Porton, *Stranger*; Moshe Lavee, “The ‘Tractate’ of Conversion,” *European Journal of Jewish Studies*, 4 (2010) 169–213.

8 Some scholars such as Cohen (*Beginnings*, 234–238) have argued that the rabbinic presentations of conversion differ from Christian baptism rituals in placing less explicit emphasis on formulations of “mystical” or “spiritual” transformation. However, in terms of the purposes of my argument here, the rabbinic conversion ritual and Christian baptism do share in common the functional role of changing an ‘outsider’ into a ‘covenantal insider.’

9 Furstenberg, “Christianization.”

10 Sifre Numbers, Piska 108 (ed. Horowitz); see also Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai to Exod 12:48, BT Keritot 9a.

11 See the versions of the debate between R. Joshua and R. Eliezer in BT Yevamot 46a-b, PT Kiddushin 3:12; likewise, the Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael (*Nezikin* 18) and Genesis Rabbah 46:2 emphasize Abraham’s circumcision at age 99 as setting a precedent for later male converts.

12 See BT Yevamot 47b, specifically describing the conversion of a woman, as well as BT Yevamot 46a-b, describing the “mothers” who left Egypt and were the first to enter into Israel’s covenant at Sinai. Due to the repeatedly-emphasized normative role of immersion for both male and female converts, it is a misconception simply to say that that the parallel in rabbinic Judaism to Christian baptism is the act of circumcision, as does, e. g., Ferguson (*Baptism*, 82), who states that “the heart of the rabbinic conversion ceremony was circumcision, not baptism.” Rather, while circumcision certainly plays an important role, one can also say that, in other regards, a key parallel to Christian baptism is rabbinic baptism! Likewise, in the context of Pauline theology, James Dunn argues against those who see Paul as replacing circumcision with baptism; rather, according to Dunn, Paul did not see circumcision as a conversionary act within the previous “old covenant,” and so likewise did not conceive of the initiatory act of baptism as a replacement for circumcision. See Dunn, *Theology*, 454–455, 458.

In this basic presentation of conversion, the convert joins the people of God through a process in which “baptism” is a crucial element. However, once the ritual of transfer to an inside-member of the group has taken place, all subsequent offspring of that person are treated as inside-members of the group by virtue of their natural birth. That is to say, the children born to a convert do not themselves have to undergo any ritual of immersion in order to be considered members of the covenant people. This applies even in the case where the conversion took place after conception but before birth: “If a pregnant Gentile woman converted, her son does not require immersion.”¹³ In this sense, just as the requirements of converts parallel the requirements of the Israelites at Sinai, so too there is a similar parallel in the case of their children: the Israelites at Sinai underwent distinctive rituals as part of their entry into the covenant, but their subsequent generations “inherited” their covenant status simply through natural birth. Thus, whereas the first generation entered into the covenant through a combination of their own will and God’s grace, subsequent generations are members of the covenant through no conversionary act performed by themselves or by any other human beings, but solely through God’s grace. Likewise, converts undergo distinctive rituals (including immersion), but their subsequent generations “inherit” their covenant status simply through the grace of natural birth.¹⁴ In both cases, children born to those already inside are treated as inherently already inside.

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- 13 BT Yevamot 78a. While there are debates as to the specific legal place of converts and their offspring vis-à-vis other sub-groups within the community (in relation to, e.g., questions of marrying priests, Levites and lay Israelites, as in m. Kiddushin 4:1, 4:6–7; or in certain liturgical regards, as in m. Bikkurim 1:4–5), there is no debate regarding the fact that converts are a part of Israel’s covenant community as a whole, and there is no indication that children born to converts require any post-birth conversionary rituals. That is to say, the child of a convert is born a member of Israel and not a Gentile outsider (*goy*). On the legal details applying to offspring of converts, see Christine Hayes, *Gentile Impurities and Jewish Identities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 164–192. Notably, “unfitness” of converts to marry priests is in multiple places linked to the assertion that converts were initially born through an “unfit drop” (*tipah pesulah*), i. e., from a non-Israelite parent, in contrast to those born through a “fit drop” (*tipah kesherah*), i. e., from a parent who is a member of Israel. However, this inability to marry priests does not take away from converts and their descendants being members of the congregation of Israel more broadly, and their ability to marry lay Israelites. See Gwynn Kessler, *Conceiving Israel* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009) 188, 192, and BT Yevamot 77a–78a, BT Kiddushin 78a, BT Sanhedrin 27a, BT Sotah 27a, PT Yevamot 8:2–8:3. I thank Ishay Rosen-Zvi for emphasizing these aspects.
- 14 On such “inborn covenanting,” see Gwynn Kessler’s chapter on “Covenantal Fetuses,” in her *Conceiving Israel*, 29–46.

Moreover, the dynamic that applies to immersion (necessary for a person to join Israel's covenant from the outside via conversion, but not needed for Israel-membership for those born into the community) also applies to circumcision. While male converts require circumcision alongside immersion in order to become members of Israel, a male child born to an Israelite mother is a member of Israel as a result of his natural birth, even prior to circumcision at eight days. That is to say, while circumcision of male children is presented in rabbinic literature as a highly important positive commandment, it is birth, not circumcision, that makes such a child a member of Israel.¹⁵ Thus, a male child who remains uncircumcised (whether for medical or other reasons), may be restricted with regard to certain activities (such as eating of the paschal sacrifice), but is nevertheless treated as a member of the covenant God made with Israel at Sinai. Thus, in the case of both male and female children born to Israelite mothers, it is the act of being-born that effects membership in Israel's covenant, and not any post-birth practice or ritual.¹⁶

In language dating back to the Mishnah, a child conceived after a woman has already converted is described as having been both "conceived in holiness (*biqdashah*)" and "born in holiness," while a child conceived before a woman has converted but born after she has converted, is described as born in holiness even though not conceived in holiness.¹⁷ Here, a link is drawn between conversion and a status of holiness. The basic notion seems to be that by entering into Israel's covenant with God – a covenant that constitutes a "holy nation"¹⁸ – the convert thus also takes on a status of holiness, which is then transferred to subsequent children.¹⁹ In other words, the

¹⁵ While there may be various positive theological-religious aspects attached to the practice of infant circumcision, it nevertheless does not appear to be treated by the rabbis as necessary for the basic legal-communal question of membership in Israel's covenant. In this, the classical rabbinic position may differ from the view of other Jewish groups in late antiquity: see Shaye J.D. Cohen's, *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005) 22–28; Matthew Thiessen, *Contesting Conversion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

¹⁶ See Cohen's thorough treatment of these issues in his *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised?* 22–24, 133–135, 184–186.

¹⁷ See m. Ketubot 4:3, m. Yevamot 11:2, BT Yevamot 97b. A parallel to the female convert "conceiving in holiness" can be found in Genesis Rabbah 46:2, in which Abraham's begetting of Isaac after Abraham's circumcision means that Isaac issued from a "holy drop" (*tipah qedushah*). See Kessler, *Conceiving Israel*, 103, 188.

¹⁸ Exod 19:6. On Israel's communal status of holiness, see also, e. g., Exod 22:30, Lev 19:2, Deut 7:6.

¹⁹ In certain questions of sibling status relating to levirate marriage, or questions of a child's legal relation to his or her birth parents, the question of conception vs. birth

phrase “born in holiness” appears functionally equivalent to being naturally born into Israel’s covenant. Thus, whether in the case of converts or of those born into Israel’s covenant, the status of “holiness” is passed down to their children.²⁰

Classical rabbinic texts, drawing upon their understanding of the Hebrew Bible, understood Israel’s covenantal relation with God in strongly communal terms: It is the community of Israel as a whole that stands in a covenantal relationship with God, and the individual Israelite’s status in relationship to God’s covenant comes most primarily through the individual’s membership in the covenanted community. Thus, in the Mishnah’s collectively-oriented formulation, “All Israel have a share in the world to come.”²¹ Thus, a primary aspect of relation to God, with soteriological implications, is understood in terms of gaining membership in the community of Israel, whether through conversion or natural birth to parents who are already part of Israel. Within this context, any given individual member of Israel should, in the words of Lev 19:2, strive to “be holy” through active love and service of God over the course of his or her life. However, because the covenantal status applies most primarily to the community, individuals born into that community do not themselves stand in need of any “conversionary” ritual or sudden change in order to stand in a

can make a difference. See, e.g., BT Yevamot 97b, m. Yevamot 11:2, m. Ketubot 4:3. However, in terms of basic covenant status within the community of Israel, it is birth, rather than conception, that is the prime relevant factor. For an even more specific identification, see BT Bekhorot 46b, where the emergence of the infant’s forehead in the birthing process is designated as the specific point at which “being born” occurs.

- 20 With regard to such “genealogical” passing-down of holiness, it is important to distinguish between genealogical conceptuality or imagination with regard to membership in Israel, on the one hand, and an active practical (or “real”) concern for genealogical purity, on the other hand. Moshe Lavee has highlighted this latter attitude as characteristic specifically of Babylonian texts, in contrast to Palestinian, manifesting in a negative attitude towards intermarriage between Israelites descended from converts and those not descended from converts. See Lavee, “No Boundaries for the Construction of Boundaries,” in *Rabbinic Traditions between Palestine and Babylonia*, ed. Ronit Nikolsky and Tal Ilan (Leiden: Brill, 2014) 103–107. As opposed to this practical concern for genealogical purity, earlier Palestinian texts do appear put forth a genealogical conception of Israelite membership, while at the same time allowing converts to enter into Israel’s genealogical holiness through the act of conversion, so that the children of converts can be genealogically “born in holiness,” despite the convert’s lack of “pure” genealogy.
- 21 M. Sanhedrin 10:1. As Martha Himmelfarb points out, although this statement is not found in a number of early manuscripts of the Mishnah, the overarching orientation of the remainder of m. Sanhedrin 10:1 (even without this more explicit line) still implies a basic collective assumption of inclusion, apart from those who are explicitly excluded. See M. Himmelfarb, *A Kingdom of Priests* (University of Pennsylvania, 2006) 180–181.

covenantal relation to God. While certain deviational behaviors can lead to an individual's removal from a share in the world to come²², the assumed or default position for those born into Israel's covenant is one of ascribed inclusion by God's grace and election.²³ These dynamics can be broadly described as a dynamic of "peoplehood": those who have become part of God's people pass along this status genealogically to subsequent generations. Early Christian communities may have held a similar understanding of children born into the covenanted community of the body of Christ.²⁴

3. Conversion and baptism in early Christianity

In seeking to explore the practice of baptism in early Christianity, the available evidence has left previous scholars divided. Nearly all scholars (apart from Schmithals) have assumed, without argument, that children born to Christian parents did not thereby gain entry into Christ's new covenant, that even those born to Christian parents required a separate individual baptism. Given this assumption, the key question has been: did that separate individual baptism take place in infancy (as was the case in subsequent Roman Catholic and Lutheran traditions)? Or, did that separate individual baptism take place later in life, when the person was able to decide consciously about the act for him or herself (as was the case in subsequent Baptist and Anabaptist traditions)?

There does not appear to be convincing historical evidence for either position, and so scholars have often argued for one position by arguing against the plausibility of the other position. Thus, those who argue for the practice of infant baptism in the first centuries of Christianity point out that, while there is evidence for many cases of rational-conscious decisions for baptism on the part of those born outside the Christian community, there does not appear to be evidence for practices wherein someone already

²² See the continuation of m. Sanhedrin 10:1.

²³ In this regard, see E. P. Sanders's section on the rabbinic orientation of "salvation by membership in the covenant" in his *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (London: SCM Press, 1977) 147–182; also 511–515 on aspects of covenantal salvation in Paul's thought.

²⁴ Israel Yuval argues that this Mishnah's formulation itself derives from a competitive polemic with Christian notions of the salvational community. However, if his argument is correct, such a competition need not preclude (and may even lend support to) the idea that both groups could have held a similar view regarding the status of children born into the community. See I. Yuval, "All Israel Have a Portion in the World to Come," in *Redefining First-Century Jewish and Christianity Identities*, ed. Fabian E. Udoh (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008) 114–138.

born to Christian parents undergoes baptism later in life. Accordingly, such scholars conclude that the practice of the early church must have been one of infant baptism.²⁵ By contrast, scholars who argue for the practice of believer's baptism in the first centuries of Christianity point out that, while there is evidence for cases of "household conversions," wherein non-Christian children might be baptized alongside their non-Christian parents in a group act, there does not appear to be evidence for practices wherein someone born to Christian parents undergoes a separate individual baptism as an infant, upon being born. Accordingly, such scholars conclude that the practice of the early church must have been one of believer's baptism.²⁶

In distinction to both scholarly arguments, Schmithals posited that there is another possible and perhaps more plausible way of construing the evidence. Namely, those arguing for believer's baptism are correct that there does not appear to be evidence for infant baptism, *and* those arguing for infant baptism are correct that there does not appear to be evidence for believer's baptism. While there is evidence of baptism for non-Christians, there does not appear to be evidence for practices of separate individual baptism – whether in infancy or later in life – to those born to already-Christian parents. This state of affairs seems to be compatible with the hypothesis with that, in the first few centuries of Christianity, those born to Christian parents were considered to be already part of Christ's saving covenant "by birth," *without* the need for separate individual baptism.

In making his argument, Schmithals analyzes treatments of baptism found in early patristic writings, including Justin Martyr, Hippolytus of Rome, Tertullian, Origen, Aristides of Athens and Cyprian; he also assesses the evidence of early Christian grave inscriptions.²⁷ His main point throughout is that these early discussions of baptism, which have typically been assumed to include children of Christian parents, prove, upon closer examination, to refer specifically to the baptism of converts, not to children born into the Christian community to Christian parents. When children of Christian parents are discussed, baptism is not mentioned, and instead

25 Schmithals highlights Joachim Jeremias as the most prominent representative of this perspective. See Schmithals, "On the Problem," 230–233; Jeremias, *Die Kindertaufe in den ersten vier Jahrhunderten* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1958; Engl. *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries*, trans. David Cairns [London: SCM, 1960]).

26 Schmithals highlights Kurt Aland as the most prominent representative of this perspective. See Schmithals, "On the Problem," 231–233; Aland, *Die Säuglingstaufe im Neuen Testament und in der alten Kirche* (Munich: C. Kaiser, 1961; Engl. *Did the Early Church Baptize Infants?* trans. G. R. Beasley Murray [London: SCM, 1962]).

27 Schmithals, "On the Problem," 233–236.

emphasis is placed on a proper Christian upbringing “in the Lord.”²⁸ Thus, where baptism is discussed, there is no discussion of children born to Christian parents, and where children born to Christian parents are discussed, there is no discussion of baptism. Thus, Schmithals concludes that the dominant scholarly assumptions are not warranted and that the most plausible historical hypothesis, based on the evidence rather than on entrenched assumptions, is that the early church did not treat baptism as relevantly applicable to children born to Christian parents.

Because Schmithals does not devote as much attention to the theological conceptuality of the non-baptism of children born to Christian parents, the juxtaposition of rabbinic theological concepts enables greater insight into how such practices might have been understood in the early church. If it is indeed the case that early Christians viewed baptism as necessary and appropriate for converts but not for those born into the Christian community, this would both fit with the available historical evidence and also strikingly parallel the rabbinic conceptuality in which someone born “outside the covenant” requires immersion in order to enter into Israel’s covenant, but someone born “inside the covenant” – i. e., to parents already inside the covenant – does not require a separate act of immersion. Likewise, we could posit that in the early Christian framework, someone born outside Christ’s covenant required immersion in order to enter into the salvation body of Christ and to thus become a Christian, but someone born inside Christ’s covenant has already attained salvation status in the elect community, and does not require a separate act of baptism. In this regard, both rabbinic Judaism and early Christianity could be seen as retaining the basic conceptuality of “covenantal peoplehood” as displayed in the Hebrew Bible, which both traditions draw upon.

However, the absence of evidence for baptism to those born to Christian parents and the potential conceptual parallels to the rabbinic framework are not in themselves fully sufficient for grounding the hypothesis of “Christians by birth.” In addition, we need to show that this theological conceptuality is plausibly compatible with other aspects of the available historical data, particularly the pervasive emphasis on baptism found in the texts of the New Testament. Thus, Jesus tells his disciples, “Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation. The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned.”²⁹ “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God

²⁸ Schmithals, “On the Problem,” 235–236.

²⁹ Mark 16:15–16.

without being born of water and Spirit.”³⁰ Peter declares to his first group of converts, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”³¹ Later, Ananias tells Saul/Paul, “Get up, be baptized, and have your sins washed away, calling on his name.”³² And Paul himself says, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.”³³ Such verses could easily be (and at various points have been) read as indicating that “all” individuals need to engage in baptism in order to be saved and enter the kingdom of God. In such a reading, the idea that some could participate in these gifts without baptism, simply by being born to those who were already members of the body of Christ, would seem theologically impossible.

Thus, in order to assert the hypothesis of “Christians by birth,” we need, at the least, to provide a plausible potential explanation for how early Christians might have read such passages without having seen a need for baptism for those born to Christian parents. One historical-theological factor in this regard concerns the newness of the “new covenant.” Within the setting of the New Testament texts, the message of Christ’s salvation was initially preached to a world in which no one had yet been born to Christian parents. Thus, because everyone was in a starting position of being outside Christ’s covenant, there was no one in the world who could claim to be a part of that covenant without the transformative act of baptism. At that time, therefore, the question of whether “second-generation” Christians required baptism was simply moot.

In addition, the earliest Christian communities do not appear to have placed a strong emphasis on the idea of procreation. The texts of the New Testament do not contain exhortations to the members of their communities to “be fruitful and multiply.” While childbearing is mentioned in passing in 1 Tim 2:15, the overall picture presented by the New Testament does not seem to envision a scenario in which children being born to those already part of the Christian community is a typical phenomenon. This basic orientation, at least as far as the available evidence indicates, appears to have continued through the end of the second century: “Throughout the

³⁰ John 3:5.

³¹ Acts 2:38–39.

³² Acts 22:16.

³³ Rom 6:3–4.

period under consideration (the late second century C.E.), Christianity remained dependent upon conversion for its growth and sustenance; an argument for human procreation as a means of *Christian* self-perpetuation receives virtually no attention.³⁴ If the notion of Christian procreation is not a primary normative element, it makes sense that questions of baptism of children born to Christian parents would not have received much explicit treatment one way or another.

Given these historical circumstances, the emphasis on baptism in the New Testament, and the absence of specific assertions such as “baptism is not needed for those born into the Christian community,” do not in themselves tell us how the early Christian communities would have engaged the practical and theological-conceptual question of how to view children born into the Christian community when such births did occur. The fact that someone born outside the body of Christ stands in dire need of baptism does not inherently indicate one way or another what would be the case with someone born to parents who were “already inside.” While it would be possible in principle for a community to conclude that each new generation also requires baptism, it seems equally possible for a community to view baptism as required specifically and only for those who entered the salvational community from the outside. That is to say, just as the biblical “old covenant” involved a community that underwent an communally-foundational initiation at Sinai but subsequently passed on covenant status by natural birth, the community of the New Covenant could have understood themselves as paralleling the Old Covenant in that regard. Thus, like rabbinic Judaism, communities in the first centuries of Christianity could in this way have understood baptism, and the New Testament discussion of baptism, as applying specifically and only to converts.

The notion of “born into the covenantal community,” in connection with a genealogical conception of identity, was a common feature of many forms of Second Temple Judaism in the cultural context out of which early Christianity arose. Given this, if we do not find strong explicit evidence of a departure from this orientation in the early church, then it makes more sense, all things being equal, to assume that the early church simply maintained the inherited idea of being covenanted through birth. In this regard, recent scholarship has pointed to ways in which, contrary to previous scholarly assumptions, early Christianity appears to have retained

³⁴ Denise Kimber Buell, *Making Christians* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999)

³³ See also Will Deming, *Paul on Marriage and Celibacy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) 199–200.

distinctively genealogical and “ethnic” ways of understanding Christian identity.

For instance, Stanley Stowers argues that Paul’s writings indicate “a genuine investment in Jewish beliefs about kinship and descent that are central to the Hebrew Bible” and that in Paul’s presentation, God “has founded covenants that descendants inherit merely by being born of the chosen lineage.”³⁵ Again, there is a structurally similar conception in classical rabbinic conceptions of conversion, wherein Gentile converts gain a transformed genealogy and the children they subsequently produce are already part of the holy community of Israel at birth. Such a conception would also fit well with Caroline Johnson Hodge’s approach to Paul, who argues, “As in Hosea, also in Paul this new relationship is understood in terms ethnicity and kinship. Paul follows biblical models to announce his gospel: gentiles have been adopted as sons and made into a *laos* of the God of Israel, a position previously occupied by the Israelites alone.”³⁶ If baptism in Christ has transformed Gentiles into adopted sons and therefore heirs, on a biblical ethnic-kinship model, then it stands to reason that “grandsons” born subsequent to the act of adoption could be considered also as heirs by virtue of natural birth.

In a similar manner, Matthew Thiessen has argued that, in Paul’s understanding, particularly as expressed in Galatians 3, Gentiles undergo “a material transformation” by God sending Christ’s *pneuma* into their heart, a change that provides them with a new genealogical descent from Abraham.³⁷ Thus, he engages in a form of “ethnic reasoning” wherein, as Thiessen puts it, Paul concludes “that, if gentiles want to receive the inheritance of Abraham, they need to become genealogically related to him.”³⁸ A key point of Thiessen’s argument is that, while Paul does present Gentile Christians as pneumatic/spiritual descendants of Abraham, in contrast to a form of sarkic/fleshly descent, the contrast of “pneumatic vs. sarkic” is wrongly understood if construed in terms of a “spiritual vs. physical” or “spiritual vs. material” binary. Rather, pneumatic and sarkic are both different types of “material” descent.³⁹ The reception of the *pneuma* following baptism enables Gentiles to be “grafted in” to God’s covenant with Abraham, but this grafting, once

35 Stanley Stowers, “Matter and Spirit, or What is Pauline Participation in Christ,” in *Holy Spirit*, ed. Eugene Rogers (John Wiley, 2009) 96.

36 Caroline Johnson Hodge, *If Sons Then Heirs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) 3; also 145–146, 151.

37 Matthew Thiessen, *Paul and the Gentile Problem* (Oxford University Press, 2016) 117.

38 Thiessen, *Paul*, 128.

39 Thiessen, *Paul*, 115.

achieved, creates a genuinely genealogical relation to Abraham.⁴⁰ Just as a grafted branch becomes able to put forth new buds without subsequent re-grafting, so too, once one's genealogy has been materially transformed by Christ's *pneuma*, children born after this grafting would already be part of the "tree" and would not require re-grafting through a separate baptism.⁴¹

In rereading Paul's use of "spirit" and "flesh" in relation to questions of descent and inheritance, it is crucial, as James Dunn has emphasized, to refrain from projecting onto Paul the metaphysical dualism that, especially in a post-Augustinian context, eventually came to characterize later Christianity. For Paul, a negative view of the flesh (*sarx*) does not entail a negative view of the body (*soma*), and the contrast between spirit and flesh does not at all imply a contrast between spirit and body.⁴² To be sure, one who adopts a spiritual vs. material binary could be led to reject the significance of physical birth as relevant to spiritual descent and a spiritual covenant, and thus would be more likely to affirm baptism anew in each generation. By contrast, however, once we move away from the uncritical assumption that Paul's "pneumatic descent" stands in contrast to material or physical conceptions, there is no inherent reason why baptized Christians' newly gained genealogical connection to Abraham should not be passed on to their children through physical-material-bodily childbirth.

The same can be said about the continued emphasis in the early Church fathers with regard to their prominent rhetoric of Christian identity as spiritual. While many have assumed that such terminology stands inherently in contrast to genealogical or ethnic conceptions of identity, Denise Kimber Buell shows that early Christian thinkers repeatedly presented the Christian community as constituting a new *genos*, which in the context of late antiquity frequently has the connotation of race, ethnicity, people or lineage.⁴³ Christian writers also used similarly ethnic Greek and Latin

⁴⁰ Thiessen, *Paul*, 118–122.

⁴¹ As Thiessen points out (*Paul*, 119–120), the notion of converts being "grafted" can also be found in BT Yevamot 63a, with regard to Ruth the Moabitess and Naamah the Ammonitess.

⁴² Dunn, *Theology*, 70–73. On subsequent Christian adoption of a contrast between spirit and body, see, more generally, Peter Brown, *The Body and Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988). On theological differences between pre- and post-Augustinian Christianity on issues of sin and baptism, with relevance to the present argument, see Elaine Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent: Sex and Politics in Early Christianity* (New York: Random House, 1988), and David F. Wright, "Augustine and the Transformation of Baptism," in *Origins of Christendom in the West*, ed. Alan Kreider (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 2001) 287–310.

⁴³ Denise Kimber Buell, *Why This New Race* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005) 2.

terms such as *ethnos*, *laos*, *politeia*, *genus* and *natio* to describe the Christian community.⁴⁴ In other words, early Christians did not see their community as inherently distanced from ethnic-genealogical conceptuality. To take one example, Justin Martyr presents Christianity in genealogical terms and “describes the results of becoming a Christian as having become a descendant of Abraham, Jacob, or Christ.”⁴⁵ Instead of distinguishing Christianity from Judaism by associating ethnic linkage only with the latter and not with the former, “Belief in Jesus as Christ is the only factor that consistently distinguishes ‘Christians’ from ‘Jews’ in Justin.”⁴⁶ It would thus have been possible for early Christians to view Greeks and Jews as older, fleshly forms of ethnic-genealogical identity, and Christianity as a new, spiritual form of ethnic-genealogical identity – but a form of ethnic-genealogical identity nonetheless, in which the new *genos* of the Christian community would pass on their spiritual standing to their children through natural childbirth. The key distinguishing element would not lie in the physicality or bodiliness of procreation, but rather in the question of whether the child born was born “in holiness” to Christian parents or “not in holiness” to non-Christian parents.

Although there is very little explicit theological reflection from the first few centuries of Christianity about the status of children born to Christian parents, this issue does appear to be discussed in 1 Cor 7:14. In permitting a person who becomes baptized to remain married to an unbelieving spouse, Paul writes, “the unbelieving husband is made holy through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy through her husband. Otherwise, your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.” Although the verse is not totally clear, the logic seems to be that children born to a mixed couple are holy, whereas children born to two unbelieving parents are born unclean. The implication would be that if children born even to a mixed couple are born holy, then children born to two believing parents are all the more so. Paul’s reasoning seems to be addressing itself to a border case: the cases with two unbelieving parents and with two believing parents are clear, but what is the case with one believing parent and one unbelieving parent?⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Buell, *Why This*, 2.

⁴⁵ Buell, *Why This*, 96.

⁴⁶ Buell, *Why This*, 97; also 108.

⁴⁷ For an argument that Paul can be read as engaging in a type of “halakhic” legal reasoning in 1 Cor 7:14, paralleling rabbinic approaches to the status of children, see Yonder Moynihan Gillighan, “Jewish Laws on Illicit Marriage, the Defilement of Offspring, and the Holiness of the Temple,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 121 (2002) 711–744. Gillighan (731–743) also provides a helpful survey of relevant historical interpretations of 1 Cor 7:14.

Paul rules that the believing parent's status is decisive. There seems to be a strong general assumption that parents' status is conveyed to their offspring through natural birth. As such, it seems entirely compatible with the notion children born to Christian parents would not stand in need of baptism. Furthermore, it is notable that m. Yevamot 11:2 and m. Ketubot 4:3 employ the very similar formulation, "born in holiness" to children born to a woman following her conversionary immersion. While the text in 1 Corinthians could be subject to different interpretations, it nevertheless serves plausibly as a positive indication that the status of Christian parents was viewed as conveyed to their offspring by means of natural childbirth.⁴⁸

The notion of being born into the covenant would not have precluded early Christian communities from placing strong emphasis on deepening one's relation to God in Christ as a continuous and lifelong effort. In this sense, a child born to Christian parents would still have the task of becoming more and more Christian, of shaping one's life around service of Christ as Lord, but this committed life of faith would have the role of maintaining and enacting one's already-covenanted status rather than conferring such a status. There are many things that would have been expected of those born to Christian parents, but the conversionary transformation of baptism would not have been one of them. In this regard, Tertullian's famous apothegm "Christians are made, not born" may have meant to emphasize that the task of becoming more and more Christ-oriented was a life-long effort, not something completed at birth. This phrase has a parallel

⁴⁸ Notably, Jeremias, while still seeking to hold that the early Christian communities did view baptism as necessary and appropriate for those born to Christian parents, nevertheless initially argued that 1 Cor 7:14 indicates that Paul, in addressing the Corinthian community, did *not* affirm baptism of children born to Christian parents; Jeremias also draws comparison to rabbinic literature's treatment of children born to converts, as well as to early Christian interpretations of 1 Cor 7:14. However, in the subsequent English edition of his book, Jeremias dials back this stronger claim and points to Col 2:11 as indicating a possible Pauline affirmation of baptism for children born to Christian parents. See Jeremias, *Die Kindertaufe*, 52–56 and *Infant Baptism*, 44–48, as well as discussion in Paul King Jewett, *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 129–132, and in David F. Wright, "The Origins of Infant Baptism – Child Believers' Baptism?" *Scottish Journal of Theology* 40 (1987) 1–23. However, it does not seem at all obvious to read Col 2:11 as asserting the need for baptism of children born to Christian parents (see Gillighan, "Jewish Laws," 739–740; also J. P. T. Hunt, "Colossians 2:11–12, The Circumcision/Baptism Analogy, and Infant Baptism," *Tyndale Bulletin* 41 [1990] 227–244). If 1 Cor 7:14 can be understood as linked to a framework of non-baptism for children born to Christian parents, then it would seem that this view can plausibly be consistent with Paul's thought as a whole.

in Seneca's assertion that "One is not born wise, but becomes wise,"⁴⁹ which is rendered by Paul Veyne as "A sage is made, not born."⁵⁰ In this sense, Tertullian's phrase need not indicate that he viewed children born to Christian parents as standing in need of individual baptism or conversion.

The argument I have been seeking to put forth accords well with the orientation of recent scholarship arguing that many assumptions concerning stark demarcations between Judaism and Christianity were historically concretized only in the fourth century and following.⁵¹ Prior to that period, though there may have been various distinctions between sub-groups and sects, the lines between Judaism and Christianity were much less sharply defined, so that there would not have been a clear basis for designating any given practice or notion as "Christian and therefore not Jewish" or as "Jewish and therefore not Christian." As Daniel Boyarin puts it, before the fourth century, "one could travel, metaphorically, from rabbinic Jew to Christian along a continuum where one hardly would know where one stopped and the other began."⁵² Accordingly, the notion of the Christian community, in its first few centuries, retaining a broadly "Jewish" conception of genealogical covenant membership takes on even greater plausibility when considered alongside other aspects and dimensions of supposed Jewish/Christian division that have likewise been called into question in recent decades.

Conclusions

The hypothesis for which I argue in this essay is clearly a departure from traditional scholarly assumptions about the roles of baptism and childbirth

49 Robert D. Sider, ed., *Christian and Pagan in the Roman Empire* (Washington: Catholic University Press, 2001) 38.

50 Paul Veyne, *Seneca* (New York: Routledge, 2003) 62.

51 See, e. g., Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), esp. 1–21, and *Border Lines* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), esp. 13–26. See also the essays from a range of different scholars contained in *The Ways that Never Parted*, ed. Adam H. Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003). As scholars like Johnson Hodge have noted (*If Sons*, 46, 127), Boyarin's earlier work in *A Radical Jew* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), while challenging the notion of Christianity as inherently separate from Judaism, nevertheless retained traditional scholarly assumptions of a division between Pauline Christianity (presented as seeking to distance itself from ethnicity and embodiedness) and rabbinic Judaism (presented as preserving and valuing ethnicity and embodiedness). By contrast, I emphasize that even this conceptual division is likewise far from clear in the context of Christianity before the fourth century.

52 Boyarin, *Dying for God*, 9.

in early Christianity. However, when the available historical evidence is considered afresh, the notion of baptism as required for converts but not relevant or appropriate for those “born in holiness,” need not seem so strange or surprising. The juxtaposition of classical rabbinic conceptuality, wherein immersion effects a genealogical transformation that is then passed down to subsequent generations, enables us to reread the early Christian sources as compatible with a similar mode of theological-communal understanding. Particularly in the absence of any clear indications of either believer’s baptism or infant baptism for children born to Christian parents, the idea that the early Christian community may have maintained a “Jewish” understanding of the relation between covenantal belonging and natural childbirth takes on greater plausibility. Recent scholarship on genealogical and ethnic forms of reasoning and identity in early Christianity lends further weight to this approach.

It may be that much historical scholarship has been unconsciously affected by the predominance of post-Augustinian assumptions in later Christian theology, wherein early Christian opposition to “the flesh” has been merged with a devaluation of the spiritual significance of materiality and “the body.” In this later framework, the notion that spiritual identity could be linked to bodily-physical childbirth would no longer make sense, and so the idea of being “born into holiness” would more come to be seen as a Jewish (and therefore not Christian) notion, linked only to the old covenant. However, as this article shows, it may be that early Christianity, like classical rabbinic Judaism, continued to work with conceptions of a communal-genealogical covenant drawn from readings of the Hebrew Bible. While the relative paucity of available historical evidence does not allow for a fully demonstrative proof, this is at least as, if not more, plausible than the received scholarly assumptions concerning birth and baptism in the early Church.

If correct, this hypothesis could point to profound theological differences, with regard to birth and salvation, between the early Christian community and later post-Augustinian theology. If a person could be “born covenanted” and thereby “born saved/holy/redeemed/in Christ” or even “born already transformed,” covenantal salvation could be linked to parental genealogy and communal belonging, rather than to an intrinsically individualized conception. If such a notion of the covenanted community has roots in the Hebrew Bible and is also found in classical rabbinic Judaism, there is no inherent reason why early Christianity would not have retained this notion as well. Thus, the “parting of the ways” between rabbinic Judaism and Christianity with regard to covenantal status may have arisen not in

the beginnings of Christianity, but only significantly later on. Accordingly, further study of the theological conceptuality of classical rabbinic literature, far from operating as a mere foil or oppositional contrast to Christian conceptions, may continue to provide useful tools for recovering additional historical aspects of early Christian communal self-understandings.